Five Quick Tips for Better Staff/Team Meetings
By Randy Dean, MBA

As I travel across the United States and abroad leading programs on better time management and personal productivity, I continue hearing that one of the most frequently mentioned areas of aggravation and lost time is poorly run staff and team meetings. Many professionals report the loss of significant time in meetings that seem to provide little business value, eat up important staff resources, and negatively affect morale and performance. This is obviously unfortunate, because when planned and managed properly, meetings have the capability of being one of the most powerful business-building and staff enhancement tools in our arsenal as managers. They truly can and should be a springboard for organizational success.

Seeing both good and bad behaviors on the part of managers and companies related to meeting management, I have compiled a few suggestions on how to help guarantee more consistent meeting success:

1. **Get Clear on Meeting Purpose and Expected Outcomes Before Calling a Meeting.** This seems like a "no brainer", but I am always surprised by how often managers and leaders seem willing to call a meeting (and thus risk wasting staff time and resources) without thinking through the rationale and purpose for a meeting. I recommend to my clients to always get very clear on purpose and expected outcomes before ever announcing a meeting. A simple test is whether you can succinctly state the purpose and desired outcomes in two sentences or less. If you can clearly and succinctly state the purpose, and there seems to be a valid business reason for the meeting, then you can move forward to step two.

2. **Always Build an Agenda in Advance of the Meeting.** Equally surprising is how often managers will gather a group of people together without having a working agenda in advance of the meeting. This is a definite recipe for failure, as it indicates that the meeting leader has not adequately prepared for a successful meeting experience. "Just winging it" should never be acceptable in a professional business environment, especially when valuable staff resources and time have the potential to be wasted.

   I follow a very simple rule whenever I am asked to attend a meeting. Before ever accepting the invitation, I always ask to see a draft agenda. If the meeting leader cannot or will not produce an agenda, I respectfully decline their request. The simple act of requiring an agenda before a meeting holds the person calling the meeting accountable for taking the time to properly plan for a successful meeting experience. (Of course, if you are asked to attend well in advance of a meeting, it may be a bit unreasonable to expect a fully fleshed out agenda, but you should still be able to get a very clear understanding of the purpose and outcomes of the meeting. Let the meeting leader know that you expect to see the agenda 1-2 days in advance if you agree to attend based on the purpose and desired outcomes.)

3. **Distribute the Agenda Early and Communicate Expectations.** Another key meeting success tactic is providing an agenda well in advance of a meeting. This will help attendees see and anticipate their areas of participation. The very best agendas even identify who will be expected to speak on what topics, thus helping attendees be even more prepared for their participation. The best meeting leaders I have worked with have even taken the time to talk in advance to the individuals expected to lead or contribute to specific discussion points in the meeting, so that those people can come fully prepared for the discussion, and so they have adequate time to gather and bring any relevant or needed additional information.

4. **Set Defined Start and End Times for the Meeting, and Stick to Them!** One tip I always try to follow is to never start a meeting on the hour or half hour – many people assume these meetings will actually start 5-10 minutes late, and then they decide to be late themselves. I like to pick some odd minute for a meeting start time – say 10:07 a.m. – the novelty of the time actually will get people to show up on time. (And when they do show up on time at 10:07 a.m., start the meeting!) I also like to very clearly communicate the desired end time of the meeting, and do everything within my power to end that meeting at the promised time. This helps to build trust, and interestingly, when you end a meeting on time, recent research indicates that attendees will report higher satisfaction with that meeting, even if the desired outcomes are not accomplished, simply because you ended the meeting on time!

5. **One Final Suggestion – Always Have Assignments and Deliverables.** If you attend a meeting and don't walk out the door with an assignment and due date, you should rightfully ask why you attended the meeting in the first place. Meetings are a place where work should first be discussed, then decided, and then distributed! Make sure everyone in the room stays engaged by having them leave with a related task to help keep the purpose of the meeting moving forward.

Obviously, these are but a few of the strategies that can help you to lead better and more valuable meetings. With these few basic strategies working for you, you should see a tangible improvement in your meeting success, as well as greater preparation, participation, and enthusiasm from those leading and attending your meetings.

Post Script: *Are you simply having too many meetings?* One major association client of mine realized they were having so many meetings that people never had time to get any work done. The CEO came up with a great solution – no meetings were allowed on Wednesday afternoons – that was sacred, uninterrupted "get work done" time in the office for the entire professional staff. An interesting and somewhat funny thing happened – Wednesday became the highest attendance day of the week! People avoided taking sick or personal time as they knew that was the day they could get work done! Something to consider if you have too many meetings in your workplace environment. ;-)

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